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Courtesy photo

Ipswich River Park beckons in all seasons, but many say springtime, when the landscape returns to colorful life, is the prettiest time to visit. Others argue that come autumn, the foliage within the park creates a scene that rivals any of the best fall showcases the region has to offer.



Photo by ALAN BURKE

Tom Hogan works on his outside shot on the park's basketball courts.



Courtesy photo

Children dart onto the park fields to enjoy one of North Reading Parks and Recreation Department's Summer 2016 Kid Connection activities.

A ONE-OF-A-KIND TREASURE

Ipswich River Park is the scenic gem of North Reading

Story and photos by ALAN BURKE

Ipswich River Park is the jewel of North Reading, says Maureen Stevens. And it's the kind of jewel that sparkles year-round and that everybody gets to enjoy. The readers of The Readings tend to agree. They named the park the Most Scenic Spot in the Readings — one of more than 70 honors awarded in our 2017 Best of The Readings poll. And with good reason.

The park, which opened 20 years ago this June, is 49 acres of all-purpose, public recreation. If you haven't been there, be prepared for a shock.

The tree-lined walkways along the Ipswich River are only the beginning. Down the path is a playground for preschoolers, a track, a street



Photo by ALAN BURKE

"It's just a nice place to walk without the noise of all the cars passing by," says Bill Boucher who, along with his wife, Lorraine, is a big fan of Ipswich River Park. "It's a very peaceful walk," she adds. "And that's good."



BEST SCENIC PLACE

☀ Ipswich River Park

15 Central St., North Reading
978-664-6016
northreadingma.gov/parks-recreation, ipswichriverpark.org

- ▶ **Maintained by:** Town of North Reading — Parks & Recreation; Maureen Stevens, operations director
- ▶ **Years in Operation:** Opened June 1997
- ▶ **Features:** 49 acres of pristine landscape, supporting active and passive recreation, including 2-mile, paved walking path with water views; areas for basketball, baseball, soccer, tennis, track, street hockey, birdwatching, playground and more
- ▶ **Highlights:** Summer concert and barbecue series, North Reading Farmers Market (June through September)
- ▶ **Fun Fact:** "Take Nothing But Photos" is one of the "rules" of Ipswich River Park, a carry-in, carry-out facility. The park is a sanctuary for all sorts of wildlife and plants, and abounds with photographic opportunities. Overseers ask visitors to be respectful as they enjoy the surroundings.



Photo by ALAN BURKE

Once farmland, Ipswich River Park takes full advantage of the beauty of the passing Ipswich River, which attracts birds in abundance. This granite bench, one of several memorials to residents now passed, encourages visitors to sit, relax and simply indulge a fascination with the ebb and flow of the river.



Courtesy photo

Children sit shoulder to shoulder at Ipswich River Park last summer as they await a fun-filled performance featuring the tricks of Magic by George.

hockey rink, a basketball court; soccer, baseball and softball fields; a skateboard park, a refreshment stand, a sheltered pavilion, a gazebo and restrooms.

"Something for everyone," says Stevens, the operations director for the North Reading Parks Department.

Local photographer Jennifer Jule Ramsburg describes an all-seasons enchantment.

"Spring and summer are vibrant and full of wildflowers, while the fall has some of the best foliage. ... Most places look so cold and dreary after the leaves fall, but Ipswich River Park offers great texture and warm tones," Ramsburg says.

As the weather improves a smidge, the parking lot will fill as people migrate to the sports fields, tots dig into the sandbox, and others jog, or simply walk and enjoy the views.

But people are drawn to Ipswich River Park in the off-season, too.

Even in the midst of winter, with the trees bare of foliage, it can seem a haven, walling off the sometimes noisy bustle of the nearby town center.

"We try to get over here two or three times a week," says retiree Bill Boucher,

out for a walk with wife, Lorraine. He stretches his hand toward the calm of the river.

"It's just a nice place to walk," he says as he notes the presence of a magical blue heron on the opposite bank.

One winter day finds Matt Scherber lighting up the street hockey rink with four friends.

They're playing two-on-two hockey, with a fifth man standing as goalie. It's a hard-fought contest, sticks clattering on the boards and pavement as they fight to keep an elusive rubber ball on the end of their blades.

"We're just playing to have fun," Scherber says, though the contest looks serious enough. "I love the park. Spring and summer we try to play every day."

In summer, areas like the basketball court are overcrowded, says Tom Hogan, who is shooting baskets with friends. Yet winter still finds the hoops in good shape, baskets intact, the pavement efficiently shedding the rain.

"We always come down here and it's usually dry enough to play basketball," nods Anthony Merullo.

Over at the playground, kids can play

contractor in the sandbox with a convoy of oversized, yellow toy construction vehicles.

"It's probably the best park around," says Kerrie Camplin, as she watches her preschooler burn off energy. "He can run around. There aren't any cars. No traffic."

The jungle gym is a pyramid of pipes, its interior a labyrinth of tightly wound ropes. Nearby are blue plastic slides.

"We come at least once a week unless it snows," says Nik MacLeod, holding her son Sebastian. "During the summer, there are barbecues for the kids. And outdoor concerts."

The summer barbecues go beyond hot dogs and hamburgers, says Stevens, with dishes like pulled pork, watermelon, salad and cornbread on the menu. Kids also delight in occasional youth entertainment, like the gravity-defying Flying Frisbee Dogs. "These events can bring up to 60 to 80 people to the park," she adds.

It's also a great place for parents to get to know one another, Kathleen Peters says. The other great "perk," she adds before chasing son Henry, is the restrooms, which make it easier with young ones in tow.

The park was previously a farm, owned

by Eddie Wheeler, Stevens says. At an area behind the Snack Shack, a railroad once passed through. Some of the rail bed is still visible.

There are hopes that a walking trail, perhaps extending beyond the park, can be created, giving access to wooded areas enveloped by nature.

Stevens cites advocates Rita Mullins and Ken Tarr as among those who were essential in creating the park. "They did a great job back then and they're still doing a great job today," she says.

The \$3.2 million facility was paid for entirely through state grants and donations, Tarr says. A runner, Tarr still makes frequent use of the area.

"In the summer, you see people fishing. It's a great place," he adds.

It's a peaceful, natural setting and ideal for contemplating the past, too. Individual donors have planted trees and installed benches to remember loved ones. One granite bench, for example, memorializes Mary Ivester, who was born in the 19th century, dying in 1991 (before there even was a park) at age 103.

The North Reading Garden Club has enhanced the landscape with trees and flowers. A striking star monument done



Photo by ALAN BURKE

North Reading hockey players Michael Appleyard, Sean Albert and Devin Collins mount inline skates to test one another on pavement rather than ice. The full-size street hockey rink, enclosed by well-maintained boards and goals, is a popular feature of Ipswich River Park.

in blue stone honors the nation's military.

Ipswich River Park has become a signature North Reading asset. "Something that the town feels ownership of," Tarr says.

People, including many from outside the town, know a good thing when they

see one. Stevens estimates the park welcomes an average of 350 visitors a week – and far more in summer.

More popular than ever, she adds, "It's going to bring many memories for many years to come." ▲



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